

BELOW STAGE

a farce
in one act

by

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BELOW STAGE

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BELOW STAGE

“Below Stage”

Farce in one act

4M 4F although could be 2M 6F

Scene: Dressing room in small provincial theatre.

Before a performance of “Pride and Prejudice”, the leading actors, Peregrine and Patrice Vandaleur, have a difference of opinion. This escalates both in the dressing room and on stage, made worse by Peregrine’s interest in the juvenile lead, Selina Sparrow. The Vandaleur’s dressers, Harry and Betty, dream of the day when they can escape from their employment. The row reaches its climax, resolving various conflicts.

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The Characters:

Peregrine Vandeleur (Mr Bennet)	<i>actor</i>
Patrice Vandeleur (Mrs Bennet)	<i>actress, his wife</i>
Selina Sparrow (Elizabeth Bennet)	<i>an aspiring young actress</i>
Harry Furze	<i>Peregrine's dresser</i>
Betty Billings	<i>Patrice's dresser</i>
Troganov	<i>Stage director of 'Pride and Prejudice'</i>
Eulalia Pilkington	<i>dramatist who has adapted 'Pride and Prejudice' for this Presentation</i>
Henry Hunt	<i>theatre critic of the 'Gazette'</i>

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A dressing room in a small provincial theatre. Two make up tables, with mirrors (frames only so that we can see through them) are placed down right and down left with a stool before each facing the audience. The door is Up Centre. There is a dress rail upstage, and a loudspeaker, with volume knob. Patrice is seated on one of the stools, costumed in Regency style as Mrs. Bennet. Betty, dresser, is waiting with her fan and shawl whilst she adjusts her lipstick. Peregrine is standing centre; Harry Furze is easing him into the tight Regency jacket he wears as Mr. Bennet.

- Peregrine: Ha! Well! I must say these Regency fellers knew how to dress. Eh 'Furze'? Furze:
Certainly did, sir!
- Peregrine: What do you say, m'dear.
- Patrice: Certainly they did. *(surveys him)* And very well they must have looked when young and slim and handsome. But it doesn't do a lot for the over-forty and over weight.
- Peregrine: Can't agree with you there. It's a costume that sorts the men from the boys. Don't you think so, Betty?
- Betty: Oh yes. It suits you ever so well Mr. Vandeleur.
- Peregrine: Mm! Costume's rather better than the script, if you ask me. Adaptation, forsooth! Just great chunks of *Pride and Prejudice* - not that I've read it all - don't get me wrong....
(he sits at his table and peers in mirror)
- Patrice: You astonish me, my dear. I thought you were never happier than when your nose was stuck in one of the classics. Why, I saw you deep in a copy of *Men Only* only yesterday. Still, I do know what you mean about the script and I have to say it's not helped by our great director.
- Peregrine: No, Troganov's no idea when it comes to the Englishness of the English, or whatever it is we're supposed to be portraying. So – let's just be thankful for the costume.
(Patrice is dressed in shawl by Betty. She stands.)
- Patrice: There. What do you think, Perry? A fitting consort for you? *(She waits for his approval. He is intent on his eye makeup)*
- Peregrine: *(looking in mirror)* You always look charming my dear.
- Patrice: How do you know? You never look at me these days. It's years since you really spared me a glance. And while we're on the subject of looking - your attentions to Selina

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Sparrow are positively lascivious - not at all in the way that Mr. Bennet should be surveying his eldest daughter.

Peregrine: Rubbish. You're imagining things again, Patty. Your suspicious mind on overtime once more. It doesn't suit you, you know. It gives you a lean and hungry look. And that reminds me, what about supper?

Patrice: What about it?

Peregrine: Well - where?

Patrice: *(sitting)* I wouldn't mind going straight back to the hotel tonight. I'm dead tired, and I've got one of my headaches coming on.

Peregrine: Oh lord, not again! I tell you, Patrice, I shall want more than a few curled up sandwiches and a stale cream bun after the curtain. Anyway, a meal out will buck you up, that's if there's anywhere still open at eleven in this god forsaken town.

Furze: There's the Arcadia, sir. Recommended by the management.

Peregrine: Right then Harry. Book a table for two at the Arcadia, will you? About eleven.
(There is a tap at the door. Enter Selina, costumed as Elizabeth Bennet.)

Peregrine: Ah Selina, my lovely. Come right in. My dear little stage daughter, Lizzie.
(He performs an elaborate heel click and bow, taking her hand and kissing it. and forgetting to let it go.)

Selina: *(smiling up at him)* I just came to ask about my exit in Scene Two. Could you remember to ease upstage a little so that my move to the door isn't blocked?

Peregrine: If you say so. But it's much more fun when you have to squeeze round me, isn't it?

Patrice: Doubtless you think so, Peregrine, but I don't imagine Selina enjoyed it. Or perhaps she did?

Selina: Oh, really I ...

Peregrine: Take no notice of my dear wife, Selina. She's a trifle under the weather tonight, the same as most other nights. She's even suggested going back to the hotel straight after the show. But I think I've persuaded her it will be far more enjoyable to have supper at the Arcadia.

Selina: I should say!

Peregrine: I know. Just an idea. How would you like to join us - bring a bit of youth and glamour to the scene?

Patrice: Don't be silly, Peregrine. Selina will want to be off with the young crowd. She won't want to be stuck with a couple of old has-beens like us.

Peregrine: Let Selina decide. What do you say, Selina?

Selina: It'd be lovely, *(glances at Patrice)* but I don't want to butt in ...

Peregrine: No butts about it! Eh Patty? We'd love to have her with us, wouldn't we? Patrice:

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Wouldn't we just?

(Bell rings off stage)

Selina: Ooh, five minutes. I must be off. See you.

(Exit Selina)

Peregrine: So that's fixed then. Definitely three for the Arcadia, Harry.

Furze: Right sir.

Patrice: All right, Peregrine Vandeleur, so be it. But don't start getting up to your old tricks again, knees under the table and it's hands off. Are you listening?

Peregrine: I can't avoid it, can I?

(Bell rings)

Furze: Two minutes, sir, madam.

Patrice: And while we're on the subject of sweet little Selina, you can stop pursuing her all around the stage as you did at the dress rehearsal. I mean, it was so obvious. And right out of character. Troganov kept clicking his tongue. Everyone knew what was happening. I could hear the stage hands tittering. You are playing her father, do I have to remind you? Her FATHER. And don't you forget it.

Peregrine: Right.

Patrice:*(shouting)* Right.

(Bell rings twice. Light orchestral music in distance. Together they march to the door and jostle to go through it. Exeunt.)

Furze: Phew!

Betty: My god! Is it worth it? Honestly, Harry, I can't believe all this. Ever since rehearsals started for this show it's been the same. I can't take much more. If they carry on much longer, I'll have to leave, I really will.

Furze: I know. Still - try and hang on. The money's good and perhaps it'll all blow over. I've been with him a long time now, and it always does in the end. Why, I remember once at the Theatre Royal, Plymouth ...

Betty: Don't tell me.

(She goes to loudspeaker and switches it on)

Listen.

(From the loudspeaker we hear the progress of the play on stage, uttered with some vehemence).

Patrice: My dear Mr. Bennet. Have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last? Peregrine: No.
I have not ...

Patrice: But it is, for Mrs. Long has just been here and she told me all about it.

(There is a long silence. Betty and Harry look at each other apprehensively).

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Do you want to know who has taken it, or don't you? Apparently Mr. Bingley has rented it, a young man with a very large fortune, from the North of England.

Betty: *(switching off speaker)* They seem to be settling down now.

Furze: I wouldn't bank on it. She sounds a bit shrill. *(pause)*. Look Betty, how about a bit of supper after the show? You know, just you and me?

Betty: Ooh Harry - not the Arcadia?

Furze: Not likely. I've heard enough of those two arguing. No, I thought a nice little Chinese - or fish and chips if you'd rather?

Betty: Chinese'd be a nice change. Will they still be open?

(A crash is heard from the direction of the stage. Betty switches on the speaker)

Peregrine: I dare say Mr. Bingley will be **very glad** to see you, and I will send a few lines to assure him of my hearty consent to his marrying whichever he chooses of the girls; though I must throw in a good word for my little Lizzy.

Patrice: I bet you will.

Peregrine: Mrs. Bennet!

Patrice: Don't you Mrs. Bennet **me**. Lizzy is no better than the others. She is not half as handsome as Jane, nor half so good-humoured as Lydia. In fact, she is a spoiled little brat. Spoilt by you, Mr. Bennet, not by me!

Peregrine: I've spoilt her madam? I'm only glad she is not as silly and ignorant as her sisters and her mother.

Furze: Oh my god! They're right off the script now. I thought they were. Where's her copy?
(Betty hunts around dressing table and finds script and the page)
Oh lor'!

Patrice: *(screeching)* Ah! you do not know what I suffer. You have no compassion on my poor nerves.

(We hear a slap)

Peregrine: You mistake me, madam. I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. Now, come along, pull yourself together. It's time for luncheon.

Patrice: Oh, do it yourself, or get your precious Lizzie to cook it for you. Ah! Ah! How dare you? Let me go. Unhand me.

(Door crashes off stage. Enter Peregrine and Patrice, he dragging her by the arm. He lets her go when they are inside the dressing room, and pours himself a drink which he takes at a gulp.)

Patrice: How could you? How could you be so - so unprofessional? *(she sobs)* And you have hurt me - bruised me - look.

(She holds out her arm for Furze and Betty's inspection).

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Betty: I've got some arnica, madam.

(She searches for it).

Patrice: Arnica? What use is arnica? I can bear the bruises on my poor suffering body. No - it is my soul that is inconsolable - damaged....

Peregrine: Beyond hope of healing. We know. We've heard it all before.

(He goes over to her)

Now look, Patty old girl, let's forget it. We'll have Troganov down next moaning about what we've done to his blessed production. You know what he's like. They're all the same, these directors, they all think they have total mastery over the whole piece - it never seems to occur to them that it's always the actor who has the final say. Now, come on, mop your eyes, or we'll miss our next entrance.

(Betty powders Patrice. Exeunt Peregrine and Patrice. Betty and Furze tidy dressing tables.)

Betty: All quiet on the Western front.

Furze: *(gloomily)* At the moment. But mark my words, honey, there'll be storms ahead. They haven't finished Act One yet - there's another hour and a half to run.

(Furze switches on loudspeaker)

Patrice: Oh! Mr. Bennet, you are wanted immediately. You must come and make